

SAN BERNARDINO: Orchestra to celebrate American music

The San Bernardino Symphony Orchestra's concert of Feb. 6 will be all about U.S. composers and the music they wrote about and for this country. Titled "Echoes of America," the concert will be held at the California Theater for the Performing Arts in San Bernardino.

"People should know that Americans have written fantastic music, and that a symphony concert doesn't have to be just about old European composers," said Music Director and Conductor Frank Fetta in a recent interview. "Much of the music has never been heard by the general public, and it's up to us to present it."

Until World War I, the United States did not have a distinctive music sensibility. According to Fetta, arts in America were very much oriented to Europe throughout the nation's first century.

"There really was no time to develop a national music sense," he said. "Americans were too busy fighting wars, settling the west, and industrializing. It wasn't until ordinary American men, who weren't rich, came back from fighting in Europe that the nation began to develop a truly American school of music."

Fetta said the first really great American composer was Charles Ives, and his work, "Variations on America," will be part of the program.

"We're presenting this concert twice on Friday to more than 3,000 San Bernardino school kids, and the Ives piece will be one of the first on the program," he said. "The kids will recognize the 'My Country Tis of Thee' tune. Our goal with this concert is to use music as a medium to inspire our audience with uplifting, uniquely American compositions."

The program features pieces from Grofé's "Grand Canyon Suite" and Richard Rodgers' music from the 1950s television program, "Victory at Sea."

"Grofé wrote several works paying homage to areas of America, including the Mississippi and the Grand Canyon," said Fetta. "His piece is definitely a tone-painting. Each piece in the suite is evocative of a particular scene typical of the majestic Grand Canyon."

Lyric soprano Candace Bogen will offer two songs by American composers. She will sing the aria "Ain't It a Pretty Night" from Carlisle Floyd's opera "Susannah," a beautiful aspirational song, according to Fetta, and "My Man's Gone Now" from Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess." Fetta said Bogen's uncommon sensitivity and artistry are well suited to Gershwin's uniquely American style.

The orchestra will perform "The American Scene," a work by the first African American composer whose work was performed by a leading symphony orchestra. William Grant Still composed the work in 1957 to describe the young Americans based on geographic regions of the country. For this program, the orchestra will play "The Far West."

"The sounds in this suite are very Southern California," said Fetta. "You can see the desert in the sounds of the music, and see the mountains and the ocean. The audience, especially the kids, will really be able to get it."

John Phillip Sousa's marches will also be part of the program.

"We are focusing on every detail to ensure a thrilling and memorable concert experience for every audience member," said Fetta. "Everyone will be able to appreciate the diversity of buoyant and lively American music."

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